

Combat Memoirs of the Vietnam War

Memórias de Combate da Guerra do Vietnã

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Abstract: This article addresses the combat memoirs of the Vietnam War, autobiographical narratives written after the fact by soldier-writers, with an emphasis on their first-hand experiences of battle and their accompanying emotions. After an introduction that discusses the motivations, truth claims, and narrative structures of such works, two well-known examples (both were best-sellers on their publication) are examined at length: Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), and Philip Caputo's *Rumors of War* (1977). While both works follow the familiar trajectory of before-during-after, in which the cultural influences that made them both want to go to war and the consequences, physical and emotional of having survived it, they differ in the different socio-economic background of the authors and consequent attitudes toward their experience, as well as how the war has determined their later lives.

Keywords: Literature of Vietnam War. War memoirs. Autobiographical narratives.

Resumo: Este artigo enfoca as memórias de combate da Guerra do Vietnã, narrativas autobiográficas escritas *a posteriori* por escritores-soldados, com ênfase em suas diretas experiências de batalha e as consequentes emoções. Após uma introdução que discute as motivações, alegações factuais e estruturas narrativas destes trabalhos, dois célebres exemplos (ambos *best-sellers* quando de suas publicações) são examinados mais longamente: *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), de Ron Kovic, e *Rumors of War* (1977), de Philip Caputo. Embora ambos sigam a trajetória familiar de antes-durante-depois, na qual as influências culturais que fizeram ambos desejarem ir à guerra e as consequências, físicas e emocionais, de ter sobrevivido, as obras diferem na formação socio-econômica dos autores e consequentes atitudes com relação à experiência, bem como na maneira em que a guerra determinou suas vidas posteriores.

Palavras-chave: Literatura da Guerra do Vietnã. Memórias de guerra. Narrativas autobiográficas.

Introduction

A large body of autobiographical works written by participants has always been the case in the literature of war. For the combatant, war is above all a personal ordeal, for which he often wishes to give an account of his own behavior and that of his comrades and superiors. This article will examine two examples of the numerous works by men who were inspired to write autobiographical memoirs of their personal experiences as Vietnam War veterans. Why tell war stories, after all, if recollection is so often painful? One answer that immediately comes to mind is the wholly human desire, whether honorable or not, to justify one's actions to oneself and to others. In the case of the Vietnam War, there is the additional desire to set the record straight. Stewart O'Nan points out that the war in Vietnam, characterized by official misinformation, remains particularly elusive: in the literature of Vietnam, "as perhaps nowhere else, it often seems the author's authority comes simply from being there" (O'NAN, 1998, p. 5-6). And yet, that has always been true of personal accounts of war with claims to authenticity. Veterans of all wars tell similar stories: personal, eye-witness, coming-of-age, and what has been called "reverse or revisionist conversion stories" (CAPPS, 1990, p. 78).

Truth claims are central to such narratives. With greater or less sophistication, the claim to verisimilitude can be reduced to a formulaic statement such as "I was there; this is how it was" or, as a character in a novel succinctly puts it: "What's the difference between a fairy tale and a war story? Answer: the fairy tale begins 'Once upon a time', the war story begins: 'This is no shit'" (SUDDICK, 1978, p. 132). By the same formula, the fictional account—and here, Stephen Crane is the classic example – must establish its authority not in its status as fiction through extra-textual claims, but through the power of its language to elicit the reader's assent to the reality evoked.

Besides being a personal experience for each participant, a war is also an historical event. One kind of war memoir is written by the statesmen and commanding generals involved, and it gives a more panoramic picture of the war in which the specific sights, sounds and smells of the combat narrative are missing. This type of memoir is closer to historical narrative, but, given the personal investment of the author, less objective. The combat narrative is frankly subjective. As in the memoirs of previous wars, the Vietnam memoir is typically written by an officer in command of a platoon or company, or an enlisted man who is a member of a small unit. It gives a necessarily local viewpoint that tends to focus on the psychological experience of the individual soldier and his interaction with the group.

Philip Caputo begins his narrative by declaring that his is not a narrative of the first type:

This book does not pretend to be history. It has nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, influence, national interests, or foreign policy; nor is it an indictment of the great men who led us into Indochina and whose mistakes were paid for with the blood of some quite ordinary men. (CAPUTO, 1996, p. xiii).

Caputo's statement shows that his narrative is the second or personal type (he was a junior officer, a platoon leader in Vietnam) that will tell "about the things men do in war and the things war does to them" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. xiii), but the ironic contrast implied between "great" and "ordinary" men and their respective contributions to the war also shows that, despite the disclaimer that he is not allocating responsibility, he is implying that in *this* war there was a serious discrepancy between the motives for fighting and the sacrifices of those who fought. In this sense, the Vietnam narrative (whether fictional or not), unlike most American narratives of the Second World War, is always (at least implicitly) politicized. No man who fought could long remain unaware that there was this unbridgeable gap between the justifications given for his presence in Vietnam and the reality of his day-to-day experience there. Initially, the cause seemed to be just, because the other side was officially designated the aggressor (i.e. Communists trying to impose their regime on a supposedly democratic country). This view was the moral justification for the men who fought, but on their return these same men were made to feel like the villains.

This discrepancy between personal experience and official ideology caused considerable anguish and suggests another common motive for autobiographical accounts: the therapeutic value of reliving in print traumatic experiences – writing as a way of exorcising the demons of memory, narrative as a way of ordering the confused mind. The desire to confess and atone for past mistakes, crimes or sins is often made explicit by the narrator of the personal war story. Tobias Wolff, in his memoir of the war, addresses the question but perceives a motive of self-justification even beneath the usual professions of truth-telling:

How do you tell such a terrible story? Maybe such a story shouldn't be told at all. Yet, finally it will be told. But as soon as you open your mouth you have problems, problems of recollection, problems of tone, ethical problems. How can you judge the man you were now that you've escaped his circumstances, his fears and desires, now that you

can hardly remember who he was? And how can you honestly avoid judging him? But isn't there, in the very act of confession an obscene congratulations for the virtue required to see your mistake and own up to it? And isn't it just like an American boy to want to share his sorrow at tearing other people's houses apart? (WOLFF, 1994, p. 208).

Despite individual differences, the Vietnam memoir follows a familiar pattern established by older combat narratives in which the soldier traverses a linear series of episodes from innocence to experience: from civilian life he joins or is inducted into the military, endures the indignities and hardships of training, worries how he will behave in battle, undergoes his baptism of fire, and survives to tell his story. This trajectory, for example, is that of the classic fictional account, whether narrated in the first or third person. Phoebe S. Spinrad has summarized the Vietnam version of the war memoir as follows:

In most such narratives, a new recruit arrives in-country, usually with high ideals, immediately faced with physical hardships and combat conditions; he may either become disillusioned or grow to admire the fortitude of the other troops. The pattern is essentially the traditional one of a "coming of age." The focus is normally on the narrator's own development; others presented in the narrative tend to be "types" and remain background for the narrator's own development or sounding boards for his opinions. Vietnamese are also normally portrayed as background figures. (SPINRAD, 2000, p. 338).

Any given work may extend, however, beyond the two points of the beginning and end of the year-long combat tour, beginning from before the entrance into the military (while contemplating the possibility of going to war) and after arriving home (with the concomitant problems of acceptance and adjustment). This tripartite narrative trajectory of before-during-after may also be viewed thematically. Thus, Tobey C. Herzog, in his critical work on Vietnam novels, bases his analysis on a scheme that he borrows and adapts from Paul Fussell's seminal study of the British literature of World War I (*The Great War and Modern Memory*, 1975). In this configuration, the young soldier goes from prewar innocence to a "Heart of Darkness" experience of combat to postwar adjustment and reflection (HERZOG, 1992, p. 10-59).

In some works, such before and after episodes may even threaten to overwhelm the middle, the account of the war itself: episodes preceding the combat experiences may be given as a way of "explaining" the reactions of the subject under fire, while those following

them make a point about how combat has transformed the subject. The typical narrative structure therefore allows for variations: the early years may either be recounted in flashback or correspond to the textual beginning of the narrative, and the homecoming may be appended as epilogue or become a part of the war's current chronology. The arrival and introduction into combat is often presented *in medias res*, with flashbacks to earlier stages of involvement, such as the entrance into the military or even events and experiences from boyhood, in order to give some continuity to the essential coming-of-age narrative. The initiation into combat in this case remains at the center, as the climactic moment of the coming-of-age, or, in the Vietnam narrative, as the beginning of the disillusionment process, where the *bildungsroman* typically turns into an anti-*bildungsroman*: the classic developmental trajectory transformed into that of a young man growing old before his time – a frequent trope in the literature. The lesson of disillusionment learned by the narrator is often the “message” to be conveyed to the reader, the justification for writing the narrative, or even an unconscious *mea culpa* for the author's participation in a pointless and unjust war.

The validity of this typical movement in the personal war narrative from innocence to experience, from the naïve civilian to the bitter, or at least wised-up, veteran, in the accounts of middle-class soldiers has been questioned by Christian Appy. He points out that the oral accounts of working-class soldiers reveal a quite different picture of a grim reality of young lives brutalized long before their experience of war. It may be doubted, however, even from reading the accounts themselves and appreciating the violent and disrupted lives of these men, that anything in civilian life could have adequately prepared them for Vietnam. The experiences of working-class characters – the majority in the infantry – are present in the fictional and non-fictional accounts and the oral histories, and show how the war could shatter both past and future.

More plausible is Appy's claim that the fictional and autobiographical “story of innocence savaged might be more persuasive as a literary convention than a historical explanation,” and that much of its narrative power lies in the “transformative drama of its before-and-after-structure” (APPY, 1993, p. 81) because it has a long literary precedent. It is, as mentioned above, the main theme of the autobiographical memoirs and fictions of the First World War, and perhaps because it was so prevalent in that war it was less so in the narratives of the Second World War, whose soldiers had to some extent become familiarized with the horrors of modern, technological war and had a better idea of what to expect.

By an ironic turn, however, the soldiers who fought in Vietnam were raised on the narratives – especially Hollywood war movies and the stories told by their fathers and uncles – of the Second World War, which, notwithstanding its terrible realities, was represented as a noble effort whose victory was regarded as worth the sacrifices necessary

to achieve it. However “savvy” working-class soldiers were knowledgeable about the mean streets from which they emerged, they – and, for that matter, even those who were college-educated – tended to trust their leaders and remained ignorant of the contemporary world of politics and power, especially about how their own nation wielded its power abroad and how it was perceived by other nations.

1 Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July*

For all the reasons discussed above, the narratives of combat soldiers, who composed a minority in Vietnam, predominate. While the testimony of journalists may be better informed, wider in viewpoint, and more politically sophisticated – especially valuable as a corrective to official accounts – the combat veterans have their own war stories and their own particular viewpoints. Marine Ron Kovic, for example, offers a number of viewpoints in his memoir. He was not only a combatant, but also a man who killed a fellow soldier by mistake. He himself became a victim of the war, paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair from a wound received in battle. Finally, as a civilian, he went from rage and resentment to antiwar activism. All these roles, however, come from the same place. As a result of his going to war, he had to confront these burdens in order to go on living, which he was only able to do by taking up the role of a veteran who opposed the war. According to Robert Jay Lifton, a psychiatrist who worked with Vietnam veterans, this kind of political activism was a way that many of them found to recover from their experience and reassert a sense of their own morality (LIFTON, 1973).

Kovic’s work, published in 1976, was evidently timed to coincide with the bicentenary of the United States, to make an ironic connection between the author’s personal story with that of the nation’s. Even while the title features the “birthday” of the nation as its title, it does not furnish dates or clear time-references within the text by which the reader might have some idea of when and where in Vietnam Kovic was fighting (although he does say that he joined the Marine Corps in September 1964, which would make him a member of one of the earliest combat units in Vietnam). There are, moreover, some fictional features of this narrative. The chapters alternate between first and third person, even though the narrator is recognizably the same, presumably to better represent his psychological state. The style strives to go beyond a mere account, but it is naïve and sentimental at times, with the author seemingly unaware that his text is full of clichés: “They were men who had played with death and cheated it at a very young age”; “In the war we were killing and maiming people. In Washington on that Saturday afternoon in May

we were trying to heal them and set them free” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 29, 140). What sustains Kovic’s narrative, however, is his evident passion.

Another fictional feature is the chronological manipulation, the moving backward and forward in time that calls attention to the order of events, which may be understood by invoking Gerard Genette’s narratological scheme of *histoire/discours*, or story/discourse (GENETTE, 1980). In Kovic’s narrative, the chronological story elements include his boyhood in the Fifties and early Sixties, his recruitment into the Marines, his going to Vietnam and engaging in combat, his wounding in battle, his recovery in a VA hospital in Queens near his home, his return to his parents’ house, his trip to Mexico, and his political awakening and engagement in the antiwar movement. How these story elements are anachronistically arranged as discourse, however, is significant. Thus, to use his own chapter numbers, (1) takes the reader right to the moment when he is wounded on the battlefield; (2) his stay in the VA hospital; (3) his childhood and recruitment into the Marines; (4) a point at home (in a wheelchair before the hometown Fourth of July parade), the trip to Mexico, college, and a moment when he is preparing to speak to high-school students about the war; (5) and (6) activities as an antiwar activist; (7) back as a Marine on patrol who gets wounded while under fire.

In this arrangement, the circularity of the plot is evident with (1) and (7) recounting the same event. The narrative therefore begins and ends with the moment when the narrator is crippled by a bullet, the traumatic event that in a sense determines all the others. One might say that this development is true retrospectively as well, because his boyhood experiences during the Cold War prepare him culturally, as it were, for his joining the Marines. These apparently disparate experiences, accordingly, occur in the same chapter (3). The bulk of the text, (4) to (6), narrates the consequences of his wounding, from which he extracts a meaning. They convey the main thematic point of the narrative, that Kovic’s body was destroyed but not his life, that he has in fact discovered his life work as a direct consequence of his suffering. Finally, the return to the traumatic moment in (7) not only insures the perception of the extent and futility of his sacrifice but also the need to reiterate the basic message of his body: “I felt that everything from the chest down was completely gone....I think about praying, all I could feel was cheated” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 222). The arrangement therefore is dramatic and didactic. It is meant to have an emotional impact on the reader that will underline Kovic’s passage from helpless rage to the transforming power of antiwar work.

As Kovic becomes aware that his physical disability is permanent, that his life as he once envisioned it in the manner of young men looking forward to any number of possible futures, is effectively over, or at least the possibilities have been drastically reduced, he at first takes refuge in memories of the past: his Catholic boyhood and humble social position (his father, a kind man, works as a supermarket checker); his disinterest in

school along with an enthusiasm and aptitude for sports; his excitement at watching war movies on Saturday afternoons and the “war” games that these films inspired, a consequence of his growing up in the postwar Fifties and Sixties, where the stories and icons of the Second World War were essential cultural products that helped to form the attitudes and values of the young men who would fight in Vietnam.

All through his story, Kovic contrasts this movie culture of war to his own experience of war, the connection constantly drawn between the reality and the false consciousness that such war films inspired in the young men eager to go off to fight. As Loren Baritz comments, there “were no literary conventions to organize the thinking of the soldier, as there had been in World War I. The references were all to movies, preferably starring John Wayne” (BARITZ, 1985, p. 172). In any case, Kovic, the indifferent scholar of uneducated parents, like the majority of his fellow combatants, did not have access to the more accurate representations of war in the novels and memoirs of combat soldiers and others from World War II, where he might have learned that many of the real stories of the “Good War” were also about butchery and lifelong suffering.

Along with war movies, Kovic and his mates soaked up at school the anti-Communist ideology of the postwar period. It was as if education and popular culture worked together to forge the freedom-fighters that President Kennedy would call upon in his speech about bearing any burden. The football coach teaches him the importance of winning, a concept that can be applied to sports and war, the two passions of the boys’ youth, their major heroes being the New York Yankee baseball player, Mickey Mantle, and the movie star, John Wayne. Kovic and his friend pore over military brochures and dream of being, alternatively, Yankee baseball players or US Marines, as if these two careers were on the same level. When he actually obtains a try-out for the baseball club, however, he is inexplicably afraid to go. The other alternative appears in the shape of sharp Marine recruiters at his high-school right before graduation. He is suitably dazzled: “It was like all the movies and all the books and all the dreams of becoming a hero come true.” When he shakes their hands, “I couldn’t help but feel I was shaking hands with John Wayne and Audie Murphy” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 73-74), that is, the movie hero and the real war hero. In this chapter, Kovic wants to connect his eventual fate with his cultural past: the patriotic, gung-ho spirit that was instilled in him by his All-American boyhood in the Fifties and Sixties and how its false promises could never prepare him for unexpected suffering.

The extent of his suffering is superbly evoked in the episode of the Veterans Administration Hospital, with its indifferent or casually cruel staff, its pathetic patients, and mechanized procedures that recall the mental ward in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962). Kovic introduces the episode with another striking contrast. He is having an erotic dream when he is awakened for the daily enema, called the “Six O’Clock Special.” He is locked into the bed frame with his rear-end sticking out a slit and pushed

into a line-up in the hallway: “this one’s ready to go,” an aide shouts, as if on a factory floor with an assembly-line moving along as usual. With the beds packed in the enema room “like sardines,” the aid inserts tubes into the anuses of the men and fills them with soapy water, the bed pans are grabbed by another aide, who empties them into garbage cans and puts the empties into a machine that cleans them like a dishwasher – an industrialized process that is so dehumanizing that one is tempted to contrast the “clean as new” bedpans with the spick-and-span Marines who recruited the high-school students a few years before: here is how you think you will look, in the bemedalled dress-blues of proud, shiny warrior; and here is how you will turn out: a man whose body functions must be subjected to an assembly-line process, like a washed-out bedpan. “This is a nightmare,” Kovic thinks, as if to confirm the apparently perverse comparison. “This isn’t like the poster down by the post-office where the guy stood with the shiny shoes; this is a concentration camp” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 35). For him, it is the ultimate image of mechanized death, for the shit he has to smell as he is wheeled by the garbage cans is for him the stench of death, “the living death I am breathing and smelling now, the living deaths, the bodies broken in the same war that I have come from” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 35).

The cleansing process is equally assembly-line: the aid squirts liquid soap on the men, turns on the water, and hoses them down “like a car wash”. All the time, “the bodies of twenty paralyzed men” are on display “like a bunch of cattle, as if we do not really count anymore” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 36), alive but effectively discarded. The greatest suffering, now that physical pain along with any other sensation has gone, is an overwhelming sense of loss:

Now I am left with the corpse, the living dead man, the man with the numb legs, the man in the wheelchair, the Easter Seal boy, the cripple, the sexlessman, the man with the numb dick, the man who can’t make children, the man who can’t stand, the man who can’t walk, the angry lonely man, the bitter man with nightmares, the murder man, the man who cries in the shower. (KOVIC, 1976, p. 38).

In another meaningful contrast, he shifts the scene from his first day in boot-camp at Parris Island and the often-chronicled rigors and absurdities of military training to a hometown parade, where some older members of the American Legion drive him and his buddy, Eddy, both of them now crippled and at home, in a convertible to a Fourth of July parade. He tries waving but soon realizes that “the staring faces weren’t going to change and he couldn’t help but feel like he was some kind of an animal in a zoo” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 104), that he and Eddy were being displayed dead, like animals in a “trophy-case.” The

war has become unpopular, and there is no hero's welcome. The crowd, while appropriately noisy, was somehow different from the way he remembered it from baseball games and war movies:

He couldn't tell at first exactly what it was, but something was not the same, they were not waving and they just seemed to be standing staring at Eddie Dugan and himself like they weren't even there...they'd have been flooding into the streets, stomping their feet and screaming and cheering the way they did for him and Eddie at the Little League games. They'd have been swelling into the streets, trying to shake their hands just like in the movies, when the boys had come home from the other wars. (KOVIC, 1976, p. 103-104).

When the speeches are made, he reflects that the speakers did not know anything about the war but were talking about victory and freedom "like they were experts on the whole goddamn thing, like he and Eddie didn't know how to speak for themselves because there was something wrong with both of them" (KOVIC, 1976, p. 107). These patriotic civilians or Legionnaires now deprive the veterans of their voices as the war has deprived them of their bodies, but once Kovic is able to see the events of his life in perspective, he will be able to speak for himself and for the other men who have become victims of the war that such talk has inspired. Speaking in fact will become his life's work.

Eager for independence, Kovic flies to a place called Village of the Sun, in Mexico, a resort that specializes in catering to crippled veterans. He parties with whores without much result, since one of his greatest confessed agonies as a young and otherwise healthy man is that he will never again have sex. In a wrenching episode, he has to show a young prostitute lying beside him that his penis is useless even while he longs for the touch of a woman, and the woman cries, dresses, and leaves the room without charging him. This episode has a pathos which goes beyond his own undeniable anguish, for even while Kovic does not make the connection, the young Mexican women prostituting themselves for American dollars inevitably resemble their counterparts in Southeast Asia.

When Kovic registers for college classes and starts reading and hearing about the mounting protests to the war, he finds himself gradually becoming involved. It is both appropriate and ironic, for a man who found his youthful self-affirmation in athletic skill rather than any intellectual pursuit, that it is his body and not these new ideas and information that synthesizes his disgust with the war. The constant need to deal with a body that is both an embarrassment and a daily burden, and the indifference of people to his sacrifice and his plight, hone his helpless anger and help him channel it into political ends.

It is his crippled body that becomes the visible source of his authority: “I could see that this thing – this body I had trained so hard to be strong and quick, this body I now dragged around with me like an empty corpse – was to mean much more than I had ever realized” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 149).

The invasion of Cambodia (April 1970) and the Kent State shootings (May 1970) galvanize civilian protest in the US. Kovic attends the march on Washington and gets involved in antiwar activities. At a high-school, waiting for his turn to speak, he thinks of the day at his own high-school when he heard the Marine recruiters and wonders what would have happened if, instead of smartly uniformed men, he had seen someone like himself that day, sitting silently in a wheelchair. He drops out of college, gives more antiwar talks, and goes to a meeting of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, where he finally finds a sympathetic audience. He is arrested during a demonstration, and two policemen, one of whom turns out to be a veteran, beat him and call him a “traitor” until, once again, his body speaks for him. “They see my scars and the rubber catheter tube going into my penis and they begin to think they have made a mistake.... They have just beaten up a half-dead man, and they know it” (KOVIC, 1975, p. 155).

What he dubs the veterans’ “Last Patrol” is their aggressive intervention in the Republican National Convention in Miami, in 1972, where Richard Nixon was the candidate for reelection, the last of the several presidents who found themselves mired in Vietnam without any viable way of winning, or (in Nixon’s case) pulling out “with honor.” Blocked by security guards, Kovic starts calling attention to himself until a network television crew (Roger Mudd from CBS) notices and comes over to record the incident. With this ruse, Kovic manages to get closer to the speaker’s platform, where he and another vet begin to disrupt the proceedings. As they scream “Stop the bombing, stop the war”, in a deliberate interruption of Nixon’s acceptance speech, they are drowned out by the delegates for Nixon, who are shouting “Four more years” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 183). The delegates might well have been screaming for four more years of war, but with the Watergate scandal Nixon would be gone after two years, while the war would go on for three more. This incident contrasts nicely with the 1976 Democratic convention (not in the memoir), where Kovic was actually invited as a speaker.

Three combat incidents end the book, again showing how the cinematic versions of war contrast with recalled real events. The first is the incident that has been gnawing at his conscience—his accidental shooting of a corporal from Georgia: “He’d never figured it would ever happen this way. It never did in the movies. There were always the good guys and the bad guys, the cowboys and the Indians” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 195). In war movies, unlike real combat where such occurrences are fairly common, especially with the firepower of the newer weapons, nobody shoots one of his own men. In the second incident, he leads his squad for a night attack on a village, but a faulty intelligence report

has the squad shoot up a group of civilians, including some children. In both these cases, Kovic suffers no “administrative” consequences.

In the third incident, he experiences the end of his old life. This episode even begins like a filmed fantasy: “There were ten men armed to the teeth, walking in a sweeping line toward the village. It was beautiful, just like the movies” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 220). In the midst of the firefight, the reader is returned to the beginning of the novel and the narrator to the reality of his body: “I had been shot. The war had finally caught up with my body,” but he has only been wounded in the foot. Being shot in the foot is such an ideal kind of wound that it is often distrusted as resorted to by shirkers, but he is elated because he knows he will now get out of the war. Still clinging to the prospect of heroism, he keeps firing, “blasting everything I had into the pagoda” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 221).

Reality intrudes again, this time in the form of sand that jams his rifle. He has to pull back the bolt to chamber a round each time he wants to fire, which he finds impossible to do lying down. As he gets up, “a thirty caliber slug tore through my right shoulder, blasted my lung, and smashed my spinal cord to pieces” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 222). He has no time to reflect on this condition; the fact that he is still breathing gives him momentary hope that he might after all live and return home: “All I could feel was the worthlessness of dying right here in this place at this moment for nothing” (KOVIC, 1976, p. 222).

This sentence with its suggestion of a particularly futile death in place of the fantasized heroic one, may even be a later emendation. In autobiographical works, the memory is often transformed, whether consciously or not, into something more narratively coherent or consistent, morally acceptable, or politically “correct.” As in the reconstruction of a dream, however, this interpretation *a posteriori* may be part of its meaning. Kovic’s narrative has been shaped as much by his desire to tell his story “as it really happened,” as by the personal event, which is, after all, only recoverable by memory and language. The fictionalization of an autobiography or the retelling of one’s life by giving it a more coherent form than the often confused and confusing events – as Kovic has done – is part of the purpose of narrative, the ordering by plot and inculcating thematic significance. As Philip Caputo, the second memoirist to be considered here, suggests in a legal context, there is “a wide gulf” separating facts from truth.

2 Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*

Caputo’s title is taken from the Bible: “And if ye shall hear of war and the rumors of wars,” from Matthew 24:6, which becomes the epigraph (CAPUTO, 1996, p. xi), Caputo depicts himself as another initially “gung-ho” candidate for the Marine Corps who ends up

with a more thoughtful response after having to assimilate both the destruction of his initial expectations and the final, traumatic experience of a court-martial. Like Kovic, Caputo gives the cultural and family background that led him to think that fighting in a war was the proving-ground for manhood, even though, unlike the working-class Kovic, Caputo was a college graduate, with a major in English (which no doubt explains the number of literary epigraphs and allusions). One of the first combatants of the war in 1965, he returned ten years later as a journalist to cover the end.

He gives three reasons for why he joined the Marine Corps. The first, that he was caught up in the “patriotic tide of the Kennedy era,” reflects one of Kovic’s motivations (a passage from Kennedy’s inaugural address is the epigraph to *Born on the Fourth of July*). Given Kennedy’s declared intention to “pay any price” to ensure “freedom,” such an intention might presumably include even going to war in a distant country if the war were perceived, and presented as necessary, for the preservation of freedom. It is important to remember, as Stanley Karnow points out, that the American soldiers in Vietnam who believed in the holy crusade to check Communism were just as ideologically motivated as were their Vietnamese adversaries, although, from the evidence of the fictional and non-fictional accounts, it is also true that this motivation was too abstract to be held on to once they had been in-country long enough (KARNOW, 1991, p. 79).

Caputo’s second reason, that he longed to be independent of his parents with whom he was still living, is a pressing motive for a young man eager to experience the world. At the same time, he reveals his emotional dependence on his parents when he confesses that he was afraid that if he failed in the Marine officer training program it would not be the fear of any accusation of failure that his mother and father would make but of their “emasculating” understanding of that failure. His third reason—that he wanted “to find in a commonplace world a chance to live heroically” – again connects with Kovic’s motivation: “I needed to prove my something – my courage, my toughness, my manhood, call it whatever you like” (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 5-6).

This longing for heroic enterprise, or at least some noteworthy, less banal, existence is probably a common denominator in the minds of young men everywhere, but that it must take the shape, in American culture, of going to war suggests that young American minds have been captured by mythical images (the John Wayne syndrome) and have forgotten, or never learned, the reality of war. All the factual and fictional evidence of combat experience in the two world wars, the terrible consequences, both individual and social, of modern technological war continue to elude the perception of the young men who go off to fight. By contrast, “heroic” representations in popular fictions, especially in the Hollywood war film, are perniciously attractive and influential. Caputo, for example, confesses that his early, false impressions of the men in his platoon were based on “a boyhood diet of war movies and blood-and-guts novels. I had seen them as contemporary

versions of Willie and Joe [characters of cartoonist Bill Mauldin], tough guys who were at heart decent and good. I now realized that some of them were not decent and good" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 136).

It is noteworthy that such an educated and literate young man as Caputo was as susceptible to the propaganda of popular culture as was a high-school jock like Kovic, but critics have noted that Caputo's narrator is not consistent throughout. Herzog points out that Caputo has two roles: "The first is that of the reporter-narrator," who "gives a limited journalistic account of particular events, places, and people" (Caputo later became a war correspondent, and Herzog claims that the occasionally documentary style of the novel reflects this experience). The second is the character who is the subject of "a soldier's inner life" (HERZOG, 1992, p. 66-67). Cronin has identified three distinct voices: the first is the gung-ho youth; the second the older man "whose cynical tone and self-consciously retrospective point of view distances him from the young Philip Caputo," a narrative voice that ironizes (as opposed to Kovic's, which deplores) the naiveté of the younger man. The third voice is "in both of the other two," the bookish student who claims to have read before going to war all the serious literature of the two world wars, evidently to prepare himself for his own war, but who says that in the end they have taught him nothing (SEARLE, 1988, p. 76). Caputo's lack of preparation may also be a question of military training, which always seems to train the soldier for the last war, not the present one.

If the narrator's reading of war fiction, poetry, and autobiography have not prepared him for battle, they have influenced the account of his own experience. Cronin argues, for example, that the theme of disillusionment and the structure of Caputo's work reflect the theme and structure of the memoirs of the British subalterns in the First World War, and he points out that quotations and allusions to war poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen make up nine of the twenty-four epigraphs (SEARLE, 1988, p. 75). The narrative structure of the British memoir writers follow a pattern – (farcical) preparation, exposure to battle, (pastoral) interlude, and return to the front – that Caputo reproduces, with some modification: his inadequate preparation (war games), exposure to combat, removal to the rear (which turns out to be not a pastoral interlude but a horrendous body-count detail), and grateful return to battle – evidently a four-part, not "tripartite" structure, as Cronin claims (SEARLE, 1988, p. p. 77-78).

Caputo begins his training while still in college, attends Officer's Candidate School, receives his commission, and goes through the final six-months training at Quantico for new second lieutenants before they take up their first commands. The training is physically demanding and selective enough to eliminate a certain percentage of men as unsuitable, and so it plays its part in the narrator's declared project to affirm his manhood, but in retrospect it is also misleading, for the "stage-managed exercises bore about as much similarity to the real things as shadowboxing does to street-fighting" (CAPUTO, 1996, p.

16). Likewise, the “spirit of aggressiveness” inculcated in the young officers, with offensive battle tactics like the frontal assault regarded as the only ones worthy of marines, will also turn out to be unsuited to the actual conditions of a guerrilla war, which were insufficiently understood or ignored by commanders at that early stage of the war.

Assigned to C Company of the 1st Battalion, 3rd Marine Division (or simply “One-Three”) in Okinawa, Caputo admits that the bleak life of training routine does not fulfill his “romantic” expectations of being a Marine in the Far East, a man ripe for what he imagined was war. “So much for Hollywood and John Wayne” (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 31), he laments. As a green platoon leader, furthermore, he is insecure and intimidated by the “clannish, cliquish” attitudes of the other men, even as he longs to take part in their camaraderie. Trying too hard to please, he often makes mistakes, and his eagerness is noted by his superior officers in their reports. Even later, in Vietnam, he admits, “I *wanted* to get into a fight, I wanted to prove myself the equal of the other officers in C Company” (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 122, his italics).

His doubts about the effectiveness of his training are well-founded. In Okinawa, the Marines were trained in the tactics used by the British in Malaya in the 1950s, the only example of a successful counter-insurgency operation, but the military circumstances in Malaya and Vietnam were totally different. As Neil Sheehan notes, the British had in their favor a twenty-to-one advantage against the Chinese rebels, whose force did not exceed 10,000 guerrillas and support forces. Equally important in the actual circumstances of wide civilian support for the Vietcong in Vietnam, the Malayan majority, by contrast, were overwhelmingly hostile to the rebels. Even with such advantages that the Americans would never enjoy in Vietnam, the Malayan war lasted twelve years, which clearly shows that American military and political leaders had failed to learn the relevant lessons from that historical precedent (SHEEHAN, 1996, p. 273).

The memoirs of the young British officer-poets of the Great War are here to the point. Robert Graves, in his classic autobiography, *Goodbye to All That* (1929), remarked that the officers and men of his regiment, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, learned much more about victorious regimental battles of the Seven Years’ War and Napoleonic Wars than they did about the fighting on the other fronts of the present war or its official causes. With no concession to the war that was actually being fought, there was no digging of trenches or training with “bombs” (grenades) in the regimental training program, although Graves concedes that he did learn how to handle a machine-gun (GRAVES, 1960). Similarly, in the second volume of his fictionalized memoir of Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, written by Graves’ friend and regimental colleague, the author’s alter-ego George Sherston ironically observes that at the Army School, the instructors were in favor of Open Warfare, which they thought was sure to come soon because they had learned about it in peace-time (SASSOON, 1937).

Caputo is sent to Vietnam with the initial regiments of marines who were sent to protect air-bases. From this initial deployment would follow the hundreds of thousands of combat troops that eventually served. After the Tonkin “incident” (Caputo is half-way through his training course at Quantico when the Tonkin Gulf Resolution is passed), US Ambassador Maxwell Taylor and President Johnson’s aides pushed for an “orchestrated” bombing attack on the north. When, in retaliation, the Vietcong launched attacks against US Army installations, General Westmoreland asked (February 1965) for two battalions of Marines to set up defense perimeters around the bases. This deployment of Marines, of which Caputo was a part, was “one of the crucial decisions of the war,” the beginning of Westmoreland’s endless requests for more men. It stirred up no political opposition because President Johnson presented it as a temporary expedient, but the build-up would reach almost 200,000 men by the end of the year (KARNOW, 1991, p. 432).

After the VC attack on the air-base at Pleiku, Caputo’s battalion is sent to Danang for an expected enemy offensive there. He observes also that the battalion’s defensive mission of “securing” the air-base is contrary to the aggressive, offensive spirit of the Corps. As no real battles take place beyond minor skirmishes, the main enemies of the Marines become snipers, mines, and the terrible heat, which could kill a man: “bake his brain, or wring the sweat out of him until he dropped from exhaustion” (CAPUTO, 1996: 60). He is enthusiastic about finally getting into combat, but his initial experience is still guided by literary expectations, having “something of the romantic flavor of Kipling’s colonial wars” (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 66). On a more discordant note, some tough Australian commandos shock him by showing him trophies of human ears that they cut while on patrol.

Mines are particularly hateful devices because the ground, which is the infantryman’s home and protection, becomes a menace. It has been estimated that some 20% of the casualties inflicted were from mines and booby-traps (SCHULZINGER, 1997, p. 195). Such “enemies” are hardly the stuff of heroic legend: they kill indiscriminately and there is no defense against them. When the expected enemy attack does not come, search-and-destroy operations begin under the rubric of “aggressive defense,” which include ambushes, sweeps, and patrols, all of which seem to accomplish very little. The Marines launch a few helicopter assaults but always arrive too late. Operations are planned but their outcomes reveal no patterns: “Without a front, flanks, or rear, we fought a formless war against a formless enemy who evaporated like the morning jungle mists, only to materialize in some unexpected place” (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 95).

The patrols search villages but find nothing. The civilians are maddeningly uncooperative and their stoic refusal to show any emotion infuriates him: “Such passivity struck me as inhuman” (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 133). Incipient pity for their obvious suffering turns to contempt, for they did not behave the way he expected, like Americans would,

with, for example, anger, tears, protests, rage. What he does not say is that the passively non-cooperative villagers often actively collaborated with the Vietcong. For these people, it was not political theory but human behavior that counted. The Communist forces understood this fact and made a great effort to win them over by treating them with respect (of the NFL's "Twelve Points of Discipline," eight concerned the conduct of the soldiers toward the villagers) (FITZGERALD, 1970, p. 161). Also, the Vietcong's use of terror against villagers was highly selective and politically motivated rather than random and personally motivated. The contrast with the South Vietnamese or American troops, who did not depend on the villagers, is striking. The killing of civilians, the bombing and strafing of villages, the use of napalm and crop defoliants were bound to turn civilians against them, as well as giving the Vietcong a propaganda weapon.

Caputo is reassigned to a rear-echelon job, the expressed dream of every infantryman, but he is discontented with the work as assistant adjutant in the Headquarters staff. Among his many duties as a junior officer as "Regimental Casualty Reporting Officer" is to record the casualties suffered on both sides. The numbers are tallied and written on an acetate-covered "scoreboard," divided into vertical and horizontal columns, with the daily count of friendly and enemy killed and wounded, as if they were the scores of local sports. The job requires him, in the interests of accuracy, to count the bodies and verify the causes of death. In dealing with wounds from high-tech weapons, this procedure may mean having to identify a man without a face by his dental records. The colonel was "adamant about maintaining an accurate scoreboard: high-ranking visitors from Danang and Saigon often dropped in unannounced to see how the regiment was performing" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 168), and their performance was measured by the number of enemy killed as compared to the number of their own dead, "the kill ratio."

An Orwellian adjunct is his having to adjust the damage that such weapons inflict on the human body to the bureaucratic vocabulary for describing such damage. Thus, being shot in the guts becomes "GSW (gun-shot wound) through and through," shrapnel wounds are "multiple fragment lacerations," and dismemberment is "traumatic amputation." These expressions in turn recall military oxymorons like "friendly fire," when a man is accidentally killed by his own side, or "sympathetic detonation," which occurs when a man steps on a mine and the grenades he is carrying go off together with the explosion.

The Body Count satisfied the technocratic need of the American military for quantifiable data. The concentration on large-scale "search and destroy" missions against enemy base areas resulted in what General Westmoreland called a war of attrition, whose progress was measured by the number of dead bodies found. The body count "suggested that death and destruction had some absolute value in terms of winning the war" (FITZGERALD, 1970, p. 363), especially in the significant absence of the usual markers of progress, such as the advance of a front line and increased territorial control. The logic of

the body count “seemed to have no conclusion short of the progressive elimination of the population” of South Vietnam,” because (as virtually every narrator-veteran insists) it was impossible to tell soldier from civilian (YOUNG, 1991, p. 187). Westmoreland urged the need to attain a “crossover point,” at which more enemy soldiers were being killed than could be replaced or recruited, another misapprehension, because one of the strengths of the communist forces was their manpower. The longer the war lasted, the better were their chances of winning it, as their leaders well understood from their experience with the French. The military did not seem to consider that the enemy might continue to recruit, often with the help of those very people who had become angry at the destructive way the Americans were waging the war. The body count was also unrealistic because it was valid only for fighters in the main forces and ignored those employed as cadres or village guerillas, thereby ignoring the entire base of NLF recruitment and supply (HERRING, 1986, p. 153). Finally, the body count put pressure on the US military to falsify statistics.

What Westmoreland and American political leaders never understood was that the NVA and Viet Cong did not measure their success by body counts but by the support they received from the southern population and their own will to continue fighting (APPY, 1993, p. 163). It was not a question of the number of men who could be killed, but of how many they would be prepared to sacrifice, and in that equation, there was no quantitative limit. As Ho Chi Minh had told the French in 1946: “you can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win” (apud KARNOW, 1991, p. 184). The North Vietnamese leaders and soldiers would simply outlast the Americans, counting on the political pressure in the US against the high cost in money and lives, a strategy that proved correct. Despite the elevated body count (estimated at one million enemy soldiers dead), the real war of attrition – the attrition of will – would therefore be lost.

In a *Catch-22*-like incident that illustrates the irrational reliance on the body count, Caputo is admonished to update his statistics because a Lieutenant General from Westmoreland’s headquarters is arriving that afternoon for a visit. Four VC bodies have been brought in badly mangled, with missing limbs, blood, intestines and brains in evidence. He notes this as part of the update and then orders the bodies removed to the cemetery, the “body dump,” but he is told that the CO has ordered the bodies to be left there in the sun so that the non-combatant clerks at headquarters can get used to seeing the dead. The clerks are duly marched by like visitors at a museum exhibit. When the show is over, the bodies are taken away, but once again Caputo is ordered to get them back to show to the visiting general. The corpses are starting to fall apart by now from so much handling, but they and the trailer carrying them are hosed down and the bodies displayed in a more sanitized state to the brass, who merely glance at them on their way to their helicopter as examples of the VC killed in that morning’s operation. “I thought of them as mine,” Caputo

says, "They were the dead and I was the officer in charge of the dead" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 177). He makes up a new military title for himself, which he writes on a piece of cardboard and tacks to this desk: "1 Lt. P. J. Caputo, Officer in charge of the dead." (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 175), but his black humor turns to horror when he has a dream of commanding the dead men from his platoon, the men marching along on and swinging the stumps of their arms and legs. "It was a kind of double-exposure. I saw their living mouths moving in conversation and their dead mouths grinning the taut-drawn grins of corpses... Asleep and dreaming, I saw dead men living; awake, I saw living men dead" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 201).

Even the marines' original mission of guarding the airfield becomes threatened when the Vietcong attack it at night, and the complacency and inertia of the HQ staff have failed to prepare for such an event. When the attack is repulsed, the rhythm of the war continues without any change in territorial control, and there is only the body count to note any difference: "Men were killed or wounded, and our patrols kept going out to fight in the same places they had fought the week before and the week before that. The situation remained the same. Only the numbers on the colonel's scoreboard changed" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 192). Emotional states in fact form a large part of Caputo's narrative, even to the point of his requesting a transfer from his ghoulish rear-echelon assignment back to being a platoon-leader in a line company, motivated in part by feelings of revenge for friends he has lost and a new-found hatred of the enemy: "I wanted a chance to kill somebody," he frankly admits. Setting out on a combat patrol, he says he feels 'light' even though burdened by his heavy equipment, because he is no longer afraid to die: "Thousands of people died each week in the war, and the sum of all their deaths did not make any difference" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 261). Despite his declared hatred of the scoreboard, the staff who maintains it, and himself as part of that staff, Caputo, in a reversion to his initial enthusiasm, confesses to the headiness of combat, its sheer physical stimulus, an emotion admitted to by other combatants. "The rights and wrongs of the war aside, there was a magnetism about combat. You seemed to live more intensely under fire. Every sense was sharper, the mind worked clearer and faster" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 230). When he calls in an air-strike on enemy positions, he feels a sense of power while talking directly to the pilots: "I was controlling those machines" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 297). Due to his desire to be honest about his participation in the war, Caputo reveals his less noble feelings, but he does not make the connection between them and his original motives for wanting to go to war. It is as if, like many of the nation's leaders, he wanted the war but he did not like the one he got.

His platoon encounters a Vietcong ambush, and he conducts his men successfully in a firefight until the enemy disengages. Exposing himself unnecessarily and screaming obscenities at the enemy, daring them to shoot him, he feels "a drunken elation" at the removal of danger and his own performance, citing heroes from war movies in the manner of Kovic: "I was John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*. I was Aldo Ray in *Battle Cry*"

(CAPUTO, 1996, p. 269). The platoon is shelled but survives. When it is recalled on receiving the news that there is to be a Christmas cease-fire, the men are marching back in good spirits when a mine is electrically (i.e. not automatically) detonated and nine of his men are wounded. The men do not understand that villagers cannot resist the VC even if they wanted to (and many of them, of course, were not only sympathizers but active participants). When the men step on a mine, hit a booby trap or draw fire, their naturally direct their rage onto the nearest village.

With this unpleasant and unexpected reversal, Caputo's emotions, which have been running from elation at the firefight to fear of the shelling, now transform to anger and desire for revenge, and he orders rocket-launchers to fire white phosphorus on the village where the mine was set off. The "things men do in war and the things war does to them" mentioned in the Preface include both this loss of human feeling and the capacity to unleash uncontrollable violence. Recounting a later incident, for example, Caputo says that he loses control of his men, who rampage through a village "whooping like savages, torching thatch huts, tossing grenades into the cement houses we could not burn" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 304). Soldiers supposedly disciplined by training have here turned into a mob.

Caputo does not explicitly connect this penchant for anarchy and temporary loss of discipline with the committing of atrocities, but, in what will turn out to be his traumatic episode, bloodlust will temporarily overcome both moral scruples and military training. He also shows conflicting emotions about the enemy. When his platoon examines letters and photographs of dead VC soldiers, he confesses to a feeling of remorse; these documents "gave to the enemy the humanity I wished to deny him" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 124). Men whom he thought were "mysterious wraiths" turn out to be men of flesh and blood.

Caputo's most traumatic incident again begins with the description of an emotional state. "Psychologically, I had never felt worse" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 314) and he is "seized with an irresistible compulsion to do something." The word "retaliate" suggests the answer to the irresistible compulsion, and he begins to fix on capturing two men in the village of Giao-Tri whom their informant Le Dung has identified as Vietcong and killing them if they resisted: "Bodies. [Captain] Neal wanted bodies. Well, I would give them bodies" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 316), he says, no longer simply keeping tally of the dead but eager to add to the count. His orders are to set up an ambush at a crossroads but not to enter the village, but he decides to send in a patrol anyway to grab the two men and kill them if they cause any trouble. He thinks that his real desire is "read" by the men, a "silent communication" of his desire for revenge. "It was my secret and savage desire that the two men die" (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 317), he admits. His wish is granted: one of the men is killed in the village and the second shot while trying to "escape." Both he and the men of the patrol laugh uncontrollably, a sign of their near-hysteria, as they examine the second corpse

for documents, but the laughter begins to ring hollow when they find nothing and begin to realize that they have killed the wrong man. The victim turns out to be Le Dung, their young informant. Kovic killed an American soldier, which is presumably a worse offense, but it will be recalled that when he confesses his deed, an officer indicates that he does not want to know about it. Such accidents are better forgotten.

In this case, however, the killing of the two men was planned; it could not be classified as an accident, and because allies and not enemy soldiers were killed there would be an investigation. Still, to protect themselves, all the men have to do is to keep their story straight—that the two victims walked into their ambush—and another “accident” will be duly recorded and forgotten, but the villagers complain, the complaint reaches higher authorities, and Caputo and his men find themselves being tried for murder. At first, he repudiates the legalisms of the proceedings, such as the demand for “extenuating circumstances,” which he sees as just the logic of the body count coupled with the real difficulty of identifying the enemy: “I drew my own conclusion: the explanatory or extenuating circumstances was the war in a war whose sole aim was to kill Viet Cong, a war in which those ordered to do the killing often could not distinguish between Viet Cong and civilians” (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 323). This statement is merely a justification for his own conduct, but from a more objective point-of-view it is true enough in a war that he has characterized as a “war for survival waged in a wilderness without rules or laws,” a war in which, nevertheless, arbitrary “rules of engagement” have been imposed:

It was morally right to shoot an unarmed Vietnamese who was running, but wrong to shoot one who was standing or walking; it was wrong to shoot an enemy prisoner at close range but right for a sniper at long range to kill an enemy soldier who was no more able than a prisoner to defend himself; it was wrong for infantrymen to destroy a village with white-phosphorous grenades, but right for a fighter pilot to drop napalm on it. (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 229).

He is made to realize that by insisting on the local and criminal nature of the offense a military court-martial will prevent the conduct of the war from being put on trial: “a Court Martial isn’t going to care what it’s like out there,” his defense attorney tells him, which means that the conduct of the war will not be a part of any extenuating circumstances because that would “open up a can of worms” that the military cannot afford to let happen. In effect, he is instructed to stifle his conscience, the public expression of which will just get him a firing-squad or a long sentence in a military penitentiary, and stick to the facts of the case. “And so I learned about the wide gulf that divides the facts from the truth” (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 329). With the mere “facts” on trial (that he did not actually

order the men to kill), the legal charges of murder are dropped, but he still believes that he has killed. As Cornelius Cronin, has put it, “The facts have set him free, but the truth keeps him a prisoner of the war” (JASON, 1991, p. 85). It seems that, despite his claim that he is not writing it as therapy, Caputo is telling his story with the desire to unburden himself of his guilty “truth”. He insists that he needed to tell his story and he accepts individual guilt unlike the autobiographical narrators of earlier wars, who tended to blame their actions on the war itself or on some abstract principle.

At the end of his narrative, Caputo claims to have done “a bit of proselytizing” against the war among the non-combatant clerks at Headquarters. After watching the battle in Danang (1966) between the forces of Nguyen Cao Ky, then head of the government in Saigon, and General Thi, commander of the I Corps following another plot to overthrow the regime from within, Caputo concludes that with such an ally the war was “unwinnable.” “It was being fought for a bunch of corrupt politicians in Saigon. Every American life lost was a life wasted” (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 335). One of the clerks objects with the oft-repeated argument that if they pulled out now, all would be in vain. The Epilogue, in which, ten years later, Caputo relates the fall of Saigon as a reporter is evidently meant to show that the war turned out in the end to be all in vain. In the Postscript to the new (twenty-year anniversary) edition, however, he adds,

As the citizens of a democracy, the noisy patriots and protestors had a right to their opinions about Vietnam but not, it seemed to me, to the smug righteousness with which they voiced them, because they *hadn't been there*...I wanted to communicate the moral ambiguities of a conflict in which demons and angels trade places too often to tell one from the other, even within yourself. (CAPUTO, 1996, p. 350, italics added).

Here, he wants to set straight the anti-war protestors, who, even if they have the right to their cause, and their cause is right, have not been in war and so cannot judge finely enough, in their smug superiority, the moral ambiguities faced by the combatants, even if he and they are politically in agreement. This claim corroborates O’Nan’s remark about the authority of the author of Vietnam War literature arising from the author’s “being there,” and is the expression of an author seeking justification for his own acts and those of his fellows by appealing to a reality that had to be experienced first-hand.

Writing an account of that experience, however, Caputo is, especially in his own expressed Conradian wish to make the reader “feel” what he felt, at least theoretically admitting that first-hand experience is not absolutely necessary for understanding. That a

well-told account may do the trick is one of the important motives for writing a war story. And yet, it is, so to speak, the signature of the autobiographer: only I can have lived my life, but as my life may serve as an example to others I am justified in writing it. Caputo's perspective is not that of the idealist responding to JFK in the Sixties, although that is part of his life-narrative, but rather of an experienced veteran and a war reporter a decade later, experiences that allow him to "dramatize the lost generation overtones of Vietnam" (WALSH, 1982, p. 21-22).

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